

Employees—  
Your Most  
Valuable  
Resource

# Frontline Supervisor



UConn Health Center EAP 860-679-2877 or 800-852-4392

■ **Many changes are affecting our company, and employees complain often. What communication techniques can deflect some of this and encourage employees to take responsibility, cope, adapt, and accept the changes?**

Some employees will complain about change, while others will not. Forward-looking employees in the latter group may cope and adapt faster. Be empathic, but a reality check is also appropriate. Realize that accepting change usually includes a bit of denial, so some complaining can be expected. Let employees know you understand their fears and anxieties, but also say, “It is important for all of us to make a conscious decision that we will figure out how to face the difficulties ahead caused by change.” Show your strength. Say, “We’ll allow our survival instincts to turn on the creative juices so we spot solutions sooner and more clearly.” Send a message of expectation of self-reliance. This includes seeking EAP support, as needed. Encourage employees to have an attitude that demonstrates a focus on what is within their control and that letting go of what is not within their control is part of adapting to change.

■ **Can you give me a checklist of what I should remember to do after I refer an employee to the EAP?**

**The purpose of** following up is to evaluate and monitor the improved performance of your employee whose original conduct led to the formal EAP referral. Consider the following: 1) Schedule regular meetings to review performance after the referral; 2) Consult with the EAP immediately if performance problems return or new ones emerge; 3) Expect satisfactory performance. Reject excuses blamed on slow treatment progress; 4) With formal supervisor referrals, request that the release of confidentiality signed by your employee remain active; and 5) Keep your focus on job performance and agreements to cooperate with the EAP as evidence of treatment success, not the discoveries and positive insights shared by your employee learned in treatment or professional counseling.

■ **I am a new supervisor and see a lot of low energy among employees in my work group. There’s no excitement or enthusiasm for what they do. Something is not right, but no one is talking. How do I find out what’s wrong?**

**Meet with each** employee in a private meeting and ask how things are going. It’s the most direct route to discovery. Avoid observing the group, teambuilding, or holding gripe sessions to “get it all out on the table.” Don’t be mysterious about your intentions. Conduct a few each day until you see everyone. Be up front and say you want to greet everyone individually and learn confidentially about important issues. Ask employees to bring proposed solutions, not just issues. You may notice employees perk up immediately. This results from employees telling their stories and feeling hopeful. Be cautious; this won’t last unless you take action. Formulate a plan from what you learn to address issues. Ask

management to give input and approval. Don't forget about the EAP. It can serve as a great sounding board and offer insights because of its unique role as an observer of organizational process.

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■ **What is the one area of managing employees where supervisors most often fall short?**

**Surprisingly, supervisors** most often fall short in managing themselves. Most supervisors learn on the job and may not learn except over time about the multitude of issues associated with managing employees and their personal growth. The Menninger Foundation (America's first private practice in psychiatry) spent time examining the supervisor's role in an institution and published a list of helpful tips. The insightful list addresses self-awareness, managing stress properly, maintaining a healthy perspective on the supervisory role, having a source of mentorship and inputs, understanding how to learn from one's mistakes and failures, learning how to manage one's emotions, and taking time to reflect on events and incidents daily to gather lessons learned. You can see the entire list beginning on page 104 in this monograph from the University of Michigan School of Social Work titled "Essential Supervisory Skills for Child Welfare Managers." You can search for this title at <http://www.ssw.umich.edu/tpcws>.

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■ **Employees pick on each other in our workplace, which involves very stressful nursing care. Nastiness, irritability, passive-aggressive communication, negativity, intolerance, and gossip characterize the work environment. How can we begin to eliminate it?**

**You are describing** a pattern of interpersonal abuse among employees (often nursing personnel), referred to as horizontal violence (also lateral violence). This is a type of violence toward one's peers. Characteristically, this form of bullying behavior is emotional, verbal, and covert. It is fraught with many secondary risks, including the propensity toward physical violence, damaging effects to morale, increased risk to patient or customer safety, and lower productivity. Reducing horizontal violence, like any unacceptable behavior, requires labeling it as such and having zero tolerance for it. Ongoing education and awareness is important and helpful in reducing it. It can be a challenge for leadership to identify these behaviors because they are frequently covert and almost indescribable. The upside is that both perpetrators and victims recognize horizontal violence when they experience it. The key is being a manager who employees depend on for dealing with it. Your EAP can help you determine what language is helpful and effective in supporting documentation necessary to arrange a supervisor referral.

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